DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 174 025 FL 010 469

AUTHOR St. Clair, Robert N.
TITLE Prior Knowledge and Bilingual Literacy. Lektos: Interdisciplinary Working Papers in Language Sciences, Vol. 2, No. 2.
INSTITUTION Louisville Univ., Ky. Interdisciplinary Program in Linguistics.
PUB DATE Nov 78
NOTE 9p.
AVAILABLE FROM University of Louisville, Interdisciplinary Program in Linguistics, Room 214 Humanities, Louisville, Kentucky 40208

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingualism; Cultural Background; *Knowledge Level; *Language Usage; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Processes; *Second Language Learning; Sociocultural Patterns; *Sociolinguistics

ABSTRACT

In this analysis of prior knowledge and bilingual literacy, it is suggested that the basis upon which cognitive decisions are made and nonvisual inferences are drawn comes from the background knowledge that the reader possesses as tacit or prior knowledge. It is claimed that the only model that can account for the pluralistic nature of language is the symbolic interactionism model. Reading is basically an interpretive process in which the reader is obligated to try to infer just what the author's message might be. In the case of a native speaker of a language reading materials in his native language, it can be assumed that comprehension is complete when the perspectives of the author and the reader are the same. Variations in reading comprehension may rest in part in incongruencies in socialization, the cognitive saliency of certain events from one's biblicgraphical history, or different strategies in approaching and processing new information. A reader approaches the printed page with preconceived notions, and this process is a kind of social interaction. A bilingual child may read the second language and incorrectly place connotations on the words based on the first language. The base of bilingual literacy and its implications for the inferencing process across cultures needs to be considered. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
John A. Robinson, Editor
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED174025

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND BILINGUAL LITERACY

Robert N. St. Clair
University of Louisville

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of psycholinguistics, reading research has shifted away from a concern with correspondences between sounds and letters (cf. Fries, 1962) and toward a focus on reading for meaning (Smith, 1971, 1973; Ruddell, 1974). The previous approach was based on the assumption that communication took place only when a message was transmitted or channeled from a speaker to a listener in the form of a linguistic code (Cherry, 1957). The message, it was argued, was encoded into linguistic patterns; and, then subsequently, it was decoded by a listener who fully retrieved the message. The phonics approach adheres to this theoretical model and has merely substituted a truncated and modified version of it by presenting the patterned activity of the code in the form of a written text and by treating the reader as the intended receiver of the message (Cordt, 1965; LeFebre, 1964). It is now obvious that much more is involved in reading than the mere transmission of letter to sound correspondences. Reading, it has been cogently argued, cannot be reduced to the decoding of spoken language (Smith, 1973). It requires, most importantly, information which is not only non-visual (Smith, 1971), but also human information which must be processed cognitively (Smith, 1975; Farnham-Diggory, 1972). In essence, the basis upon which cognitive decisions are made and non-visual inferences are drawn comes from the background knowledge that the reader possesses as tacit or prior knowledge.

INFERENCES

Some insight into the nature of tacit knowledge can be found in the process of inferencing. Garfinkel (1967) noted, for example, that in a conversation what is said is usually not as important as what is implied or inferred from the situation. Most of language use, he argues, involves going beyond the overt forms of speech and requires the use of tacit knowledge which both parties share and which forms the basis for their social interaction. To illustrate his point, he recorded numerous conversations in an informal setting and found that in each instance there was usually no coherent transition in meaning or form in the dialogue from one person's utterance to the other's. Some questions, for example, were never answered. Some statements, in addition, were abruptly interrupted with sentences which had no coherent relationship to the rest of the conversation. However, from the point of view of those who were involved in the conversations, the dialogue was both coherent and logical. He concluded from this investigation, and this definitely contradicts the conventional wisdom of those who advocate an information theory approach to reading, that the elliptical nature of conversations is typical of ordinary language; and, furthermore, for the uninvolved observers who do not share the assumptions and expectations which formed this background knowledge of the conversation, it may be rather meaningless and

FL010469

Lektos: Interdisciplinary Working Papers in Language Sciences, Vol. 3, No. 2.

confusing.

A different use of inferencing can be found in the works of Carton (1971, 1976) who relied on visual information such as the preceding and the following lexical items in a sentence. This approach is interesting because it provides insight into the nature of miscue analysis (Goodwin, 1975). However, as a theoretical construct, it lacks the explanatory power of ethnomethodological research (Garfinkel, 1967; Mehan and Wood, 1975). A more informative model, however, is that of symbolic interactionism (Hewitt, 1976) in which the development of self-concept (Christian, 1976) and the politics of literacy (St. Clair and Kaprosy, in press) play significant roles.

Considering the fact that most conversations are about what is not said and that most reading takes place between the lines, the crucial factor in the communicative process has to be the inferencing procedure itself. But, how are inferences made? Where do they come from? For those teachers and administrators who view language primarily as a form of linguistic code in which messages are embedded, this can be a perplexing problem. Since in their estimation all of the information in language is supposed to already exist within the patterns of the linguistic code, the need for inferencing procedures appears superfluous. Obviously, the understanding of a conversation or the comprehension of the printed page can only be ascertained by transcending the overt forms of language. This is because most of human communication is based on what is not uttered or relegated to print. For the reader, in particular, most of what is understood has to be inferred from reading between the lines. It must be construed from the personal experiences and the background knowledge of the reader. Hence, it is in this regard that the traditional model of communication must be modified. It must include the assumptions that were intended to accompany the encoded message and it must incorporate the expectations which form the basis of the decoding process. What this means, in essence, is that reading is basically an interpretive process in which the reader is obligated to try and infer just what the author's message might be.

COPING WITH MULTIPLE REALITIES

Since the nature of the assumptions and expectations play a major role in the reading process, it requires further elucidation in bilingual literacy where differences in patterns of socialization create cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1967) for the reader. In the case of a native speaker of a language reading materials in his own home language, it can be safely assumed that comprehension is complete when the perspectives of the author and the reader are the same. As disparities arise in the assumptions of the author and the expectations of the reader miscommunication results. The range of miscommunication may vary from total lack of understanding at one end of the spectrum to a minimal distortion of the message at the other. The reason for this variation in reading comprehension may rest, in part, in incongruencies in socialization, the cognitive saliency of certain events from one's bibliographical history,

or different strategies in approaching and processing new information. An uninformed reader, for example, will fail to fully perceive the wealth of information that the author intends. An untrained reader, as another example, may only perceive a part of the message intended and weave a meaning from the text which is correct but with the wrong empahsis or connotations. Similarly, a cogent and well-informed reader can find insights and draw inferences which go well beyond the conscious intent of the author. By way of contrast, consider the base of bilingual literacy and its implications for the inferencing process across cultures. Obviously, in this case, the problems of understanding are further complicated by the fact that the patterns of socialization may vary substantially causing even greater differences in interpretation.

It is important to realize that these differences across cultures are socially constructed. Berger and Luckmann (1966) have argued that reality differs from person to person. What appears to be real for an American businessman who is ingrained in the tradition of social Darwinism and the quest for a maximization of profits, for example, is certainly not the same view of reality shared by the youth of the counter-culture movement. Similarly, what is considered to be real for the child in the barrio or in the inner city is not consistent with the visions of reality shared by the children of the suburbs with their comfortable and opulent life styles. It is for this reason, in part, that differences in past experiences and disparities in patterns of socialization add to the complexity of the background knowledge which later adults bring with them to the reading process. These differences in tacit knowledge form the basis from which inferences are drawn and interpretations are imposed on the reading process.

The process is complicated even further by the fact that this socially constructed knowledge is also distributed or stratified differently within society. No one has the same access to the same knowledge. The reason for this is that all interactions in life are based on WHO says WHAT to WHOM and WHEN and WHERE it is said. Each of these social parameters constrain and control the experiences of those participating in the social process (McCall and Simmons, 1966). The topic of a conversation, for example, severely limits the kinds of vocabulary items that can be used. The four million and one-half words in the English language, it should be noted, are not available to every person but is compartmented and isolated into occupational specialties such as law, medicine, engineering, chemistry, etc. In addition to topical constraints, there are further restrictions which are characteristically associated with role-taking and role-making. Once a social role has been defined or attributed to someone, people unconsciously accommodate themselves in accordance with the expectations of the role model. Knowing, for example, that the other party is a priest, one will attribute certain kinds of action to the other party and try to accommodate that person with the use of language, reverence, religious topics, etc. When role models are clearly marked, they greatly facilitate the accommodation and attributional processes thereby reducing uncertainty of the nature of the social interaction (Guiles and St. Clair, in press).

READING AS SOCIAL INTERACTION

When a reader approaches the printed page, he comes armed with a plethora of pre-conceived notions about what is to occur. In his mind, he may already know how the other person will behave in a given situation, what he or she will be apt to say, and what kinds of responses would be appropriate under the circumstances. Hence, regardless of what is actually stated on the printed page, the reader imposes meanings, imputes reasons for actions, draws interpretations of events, and arrives at conclusions from a scattering of clues embedded throughout the text. This form of social interaction is not a unique feature of the reading process, but a normal part of symbolic interaction through the medium of language (Hewitt, 1976). It is in this sense that reading is a languaging process (Ruddel, 1974).

Social interaction is situated in time and space. It takes place in a social container or situation which has been defined by the participants or which emerges from the uncertainty of the interaction. This definition of the situation is important because it provides a basic component to the tacit or prior knowledge from which inferences are drawn. Furthermore, the various members of society experience reality from a multiplicity of perspectives. They may view the situation from the point of view of a member of a certain sex, racial grouping, class structure, or social in-group. These perspectives not only condition the nature of the interaction, but they also limit its view of knowledge. What does this mean in the case of the teacher in the reading classroom? Well, if the student is trying to cope with the new materials from a content area and if that student is having difficulty, the teacher may reason that the problem of this particular student is due to an inability to read. This may not be the case. The student had no trouble reading other materials before, then why would he or she have a sudden inability to read? Evidently, under such circumstances, the problem is an inability to handle new information. The reason for this can be readily ascertained within the present theoretical framework. If knowledge is socially constructed and its accessibility is socially distributed, then it follows that not every person will read the same passage with the same depth of understanding nor with the same kinds of inferential structures. As a consequence, when a student encounters a new content area, that student will immediately have difficulty in evaluating what is important and what is not. The result is, of course, that everything becomes important. Such a strategy creates a state of cognitive clutter. Only later, when the student is familiar with the nature of the new material, can proper evaluation take place without attributing equal value to all information. How can cognitive clutter be avoided? The answer to this question can be found in textbooks which successfully introduce the student to new content areas. These texts provide as much background information as possible. It bears the reader to what are the assumptions and the expectations that he or she must have in order to procede further. Another area in which a problem can be misinterpreted as a reading skills problem is in the case where students lack certain experiences which are crucial for an understanding of the reading materials. Foreign students obviously have this

problem, and so do students who do not share the middle class Anglo background upon which the mainstream texts are based.

THE SOCIAL NATURE OF THE LEXICON

Words are symbols within a system of human language. They provide the medium through which communication takes place. This system differs from other forms of communication which employ signs such as the physical movements of the bees in a dance signalling the location of food or the underwater warnings of the whales. These "call systems" exist for each biologically related situation. It cannot be modified, nor can it be displaced, nor can it be rearranged into minimal components to create new codes of expression. But, language is symbolic. It can be modified so that any one situation can be met through a great variety of utterances; it can be displaced so as to express concern about the past or the future; and it can be broken up into lexical components or phonological distinctive features. But, most importantly, these symbols are social. They provide a powerful shorthand for events and objects in the social reality of the individual. They allow persons to talk about those very things that they have designated as significant to them. The following examples from St. Clair and Kaprosy (in press) examplify the social nature of the lexicon:

ENGLISH	SPANISH
Sophisticated: This is a positive concept, and the word is used as a compliment.	Sofisticada: The word conveys a negative feeling and is used as an insult. It implies putting on airs, and being phony.
American: This refers very specifically to the persons who live in the United States. It excludes Canada and Mexico and all of South America.	Americano: This refers to all of the inhabitants of the various nations of North and South America.

What is important about the social nature of the lexicon is that a bilingual child may read English words with the Spanish connotations. This problem can be seen in reverse when native speakers of English learn Spanish as a foreign language. They inadvertently impute the typical English meanings to the Spanish cognates. But, the problem does not stop there. They also impute role-taking, role-making and role support across cultures. They know how to behave in a social situation within the context of the Chicano experience, for example, but when living in the Anglo community and when speaking their language they may approach a role with the wrong set of expectations. The exact reverse can be seen in the Anglo who learns symbolic interaction in the Mexican environment. The behavior of that individual is predicated on how to behave in the social context of an English-speaking community. The mismatch of roles is inevitable during the initial stages of learning how to participate in a foreign social setting. Those who advocate the learning of a foreign language within the framework of communicative competence (Savignon, 1972), should realize that

although this work is successful, it is also deceiving because the students have imputed English rules and behavior on the foreign language they are learning. Since both must be learned together, the task is incomplete.

CONCLUSION

Most research in the area of literacy has been from the point of view of psychology. Not enough work is done within the framework of sociology. Since both aspects are inherent in the reading process, the most informative research paradigm must come from social psychology and from the symbolic interactionism model of language, in particular.

Within this new paradigm, the concept of inferencing takes on a new importance. It explains how tacit knowledge forms the background from which interpretations are drawn in the process of reading. What once appeared to be a nebulous concept, tacit knowledge, becomes a highly structured theoretical concept. This is due, in part, to the recent insights of ethnomethodologists and symbolic interactionists. Both agree to the claim that society is socially constructed and that it contains a multiplicity of realities. These views of reality arise from the social process and direct the individual in the kinds of inferences that he draws. The reading process, for example, is limited to a constrained version of social reality by the mere selection of such parameters as the topic of a reading assignment, the roles of the individuals in the situation, the nature of social space and time, and the personal aspects of one's biographical history which not only influence the nature of one's interpretation of the events, but also limit one's ability to a deeper access of knowledge of the social structure. Also, since language is embedded within a framework of social interaction, the words that are used have special meanings for different individuals. This is particularly pronounced in the case of bilingual literacy where role behavior and semantic interpretations do not match across languages.

According to the dependency principle of dialectology, all languages or dialects are supposed to have the same underlying forms and congruent semantic interpretations (Chomsky, 1965). This positivistic view of language cannot even begin to account for the nature of semantic interpretation within a bidialectal or a bilingual context. The only model which can account for the pluralistic nature of language is the symbolic interactionism model espoused in this essay. Hence, the implications for revising the present model of normal science are numerous. Unfortunately, those issues are beyond the present scope of this essay on the nature of tacit knowledge within the context of bilingual literacy.

References

Berger, P. and Luckmann, T. THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY. N.Y.: Anchor, 1966.

Carton, A. S. Inferencing: A process in using and learning foreign languages. In P. Pimsleur and T. A. Quinn (Eds.), PAPERS IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1971.

_____ ORIENTATION TO READING. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1976.

Cherry, C. ON HUMAN COMMUNICATION. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1957.

Chomsky, N. ASPECTS OF THE THEORY OF SYNTAX. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965.

Christian, C., Jr. Social and psychological implications of bilingual literacy. In A. Simoes, Jr. (Ed.), THE BILINGUAL CHILD: RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS OF EXISTING EDUCATIONAL THEORIES. N.Y.: Academic Press, 1976.

Cordts, A. D. PHONICS FOR THE READING TEACHER. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1965.

Farnham-Diggory, S. COGNITIVE PROCESSES: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION FOR TEACHING AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT. N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1972.

Fries, C. C. LINGUISTICS AND READING. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962.

Garfinkel, H. STUDIES IN ETHNOMETHODOLOGY. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

Giles, H. and St. Clair, R. N. LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell and Mott, Ltd., in press.

Goodman, K. S. (Ed.), MISCUE ANALYSIS: APPLICATIONS TO READING INSTRUCTION. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1975.

Hewitt, J. P. SEL AND SOCIETY A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY. Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1976.

LeFevre, C. A. LINGUISTICS AND THE TEACHING OF READING. N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

McCall, G. J. and Simmons, J. L. IDENTITIES AND INTERACTIONS: AN EXAMINATION OF HUMAN ASSOCIATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE. N.Y.: Macmillan, 1966.

Mehan, J. and Wood, H. THE REALITY OF ETHNOMETHODOLOGY. N.Y.: Wiley, 1975.

Ruddel, R. B. READING-LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: INNOVATIVE PRACTICES. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974.

Savignon, S. L. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: AN EXPERIMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING. Philadelphia, Pa.: Center for Curriculum Development. 1972.

St. Clair, R. N. and Kaprosy, G. Conflicts of value in language. THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE JOURNAL, 1977, 8, in press.

Smith, F. UNDERSTANDING READING: A PSYCHOLINGUISTICS ANALYSIS OF READING AND LEARNING TO READ. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, Winston 1971.

Smith, F. (Ed.). PSYCHOLINGUISTICS AND READING. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1973.

Smith, F. COMPREHENSION AND LEARNING: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHERS. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1975.